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GREATER AGRICULTURAL EFFICIENCY FOR THE BLACK BELT OF ALABAMA

A STUDY OF THE POSSIBILITIES OF DEVELOPING GREATER AGRICULTURAL EFFICIENCY IN THE BLACK BELT THROUGH BETTER MANAGEMENT

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Alabama is conducting an energetic campaign for greater agricultural efficiency. The establishment of demonstration farm agents and experiment farms in the counties for the study of soils and plants, district agricultural schools for the instruction of the youth, extension work by the State Agricultural College, personal visitations by experts wherever needed, and the coördination and correlation of these forces under a central board whose activities reach out to all parts of the state, have given to this campaign the nature of an intensive and expert handling of the entire agricultural situation.

It is the purpose of this paper to present the agricultural situation in the Black Belt, and then to discuss the possibilities of developing greater agricultural efficiency in this region. This will be done by comparing the Black Belt with the regions immediately adjacent to it, north and south, where white majorities of population are found and successful farming obtains.

The Black Belt of Alabama stretches across the south central portion of the state, from east to west, and comprises twenty-one counties.¹ It embraces a variety of physiographic divisions and soils. The northern part of the Belt embraces a country somewhat rolling, of metamorphic soils, and the southern extends into the upper part of the coastal uplands, but the greater part of the Belt embraces the central prairie region that runs diagonally across the state, with a width of thirty-five or forty miles. By fact of the physiographic features the soils of the Black Belt are the most

¹ Russell, Chambers, Lee, Barbour, Macon, Bullock, Montgomery Butler, Lowndes, Autauga, Perry, Dallas, Wilcox, Monroe, Clarke, Marengo, Choctaw, Hale, Sumter, Greene, and Pickens.

fertile of the state and better adapted to the cultivation of the staples than the other regions.

Immediately adjacent to the Black Belt, north and south, respectively, are regions of gravelly hills, grey gneissic lands, and long leaf pine uplands, which contain white majorities of population. Out of these regions, twenty-one counties have been selected² for the purpose of comparisons with the twenty-one counties of the Black Belt.

In presenting comparisons of the Black Belt with the White Counties it is possible to cite in each group of counties striking particular instances of individuals who have adopted new and scientific methods of agriculture with remarkable results. But agricultural records will tell more accurately the story of the mass of farmers.

Agricultural Records

In the counties of the Black Belts in 1910 there were 26,138 white farmers and 76,648 negro farmers cultivating 1,798,056 acres in cotton and 812,982 acres in corn.³ The average production of cotton per acre was 0.27 of a bale, and of corn 10.4 bushels per acre. The cotton acreage in 1910 was 51,840 acres greater and the corn acreage 140,614 acres less than in 1900. In the twenty-one White Counties there were 51,131 white farmers and 20,797 negro farmers cultivating 917,143 acres in cotton and 771,378 acres in corn. The average production of cotton per acre was 0.34 of a bale and of corn 11.4 bushels per acre. The cotton acreage was 203,880 acres greater and the corn acreage 102,594 less than in 1900.

Two significant facts stand out in these records: the per acre yield and the increase or decrease of acreage. As to the per acre

² Fayette, Lamar, Tuscaloosa, Bibb, Chilton, Coosa, Elmore, Talladega, Shelby, Tallapoosa, Clay, Randolph, Henry, Dale, Pike, Coffin, Crenshaw, Covington, Escambia, Conecuh, and Washington. To be referred to hereafter as White Counties.

³ A farmer or farm operator according to the census definition is a person who directs the operation of a farm. A farm is all the land directly farmed by one person managing and conducting agricultural operations, either by his own labor, alone, or by the assistance of the members of his household or hired employees. Therefore, owners, tenants, and managers are classed as farmers. The census classification of share laborers as independent farmers is not correct, for the share system involves supervision. The classification serves the purpose here, however.

yield, it is conceded by all who are familiar with the soils of the Black Belt and the White Counties that by nature the soils of the Black Belt are much more fertile and more adapted to the cultivation of the staples than the soils of the other regions, yet there is a smaller average yield per acre in the Black Belt. The reduced acreage of the Black Belt is due to the decline of rural population as will be shown herein later, and not to turning the lands into other forms of agriculture. They are idle and vacant, turned in many instances into grass fields. In the White Counties, the increase is due to increase in rural population and to opening up new lands.

An analysis of the two groups of counties locates more definitely the causes of the smaller average yield per acre of the Black Belt. In the counties of the Black Belt in which the negro constitutes $62\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of the population,⁴ the average yield of cotton per acre is 0.26 of a bale and 10.5 bushels of corn per acre; in those counties in which the negro constitutes from 50 to $62\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of the population,⁵ the average yield of cotton per acre is 0.30 of a bale and 10 bushels of corn per acre. In the group of White Counties where the negro constitutes $37\frac{1}{2}$ to 50 per cent of the population,⁶ the yield of cotton per acre is 0.34 of a bale and 11.4 bushels of corn; in the counties where the negro constitutes 10 to $37\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of the population,⁷ the yield of cotton per acre is 0.35 of a bale and 11.5 bushels of corn per acre. These results are significant, for the negro in increasing majorities is found on the best soils of the state.

Farm Improvement

Scientific farming includes within its program not only actual agricultural results, but the whole life of the farm: improvement of soils, adequate farm buildings, new and modern implements and machinery. In the Black Belt the value of lands and buildings increased 88 per cent between 1900 and 1910 and the value of implements and machinery increased 69 per cent. In the White Counties the per cent of difference in the same items for the same period

⁴ Russell, Macon, Bullock, Barbour, Montgomery, Lowndes, Wilcox, Dallas, Morengo, Perry, Hale, Greene, and Sumter.

⁵ Pickens, Autauga, Chambers, Lee, Butler, Monroe, Clarke, and Choctaw.

⁶ Tuscaloosa, Talladega, Coosa, Elmore, Pike, Henry, Conecuh, and Washington.

⁷ Lamar, Fayette, Bibb, Chilton, Shelby, Clay, Randolph, Tallapoosa, Crenshaw, Dale, Coffin, Covington, and Escambia.

of time was: land and buildings, 150, buildings alone, 133, implements and machinery, 113, a per cent of difference in each item twice as great as in the Black Belt.

An analysis of the two groups of counties as to the above items also reveals striking results. In the counties of the Black Belt where the negro constitutes $62\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of the population,⁸ the improvements between 1900 and 1910 were: land and buildings, 75, buildings alone, 68, implements and machinery, 54; in the counties where the negro constitutes from 50 to $62\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of the population⁹: land and buildings, 108, buildings alone, 107, implements and machinery, 93. In the White Counties where the negro constitutes $37\frac{1}{2}$ to 50 per cent of the population,¹⁰ the improvements were: land and buildings, 121, buildings alone, 102, implements and machinery, 96; in the counties where the negro constitutes 10 to $37\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of the population,¹¹ land and buildings, 171, buildings alone, 153, implements and machinery, 130. It is thus evident that agricultural production and farm improvements increase in a ratio inverse to that of the presence of the negro population. This is set forth in the map—Race, Farm Improvements and Production.¹²

Movements of Population

The real condition and spirit of agriculture are probably more accurately revealed in the movements of population. Between 1900 and 1910 the rural population of the Black Belt, if we exclude four border counties, decreased 37.1 per cent. Ten counties suffered an average loss of 8.3 per cent.¹³ In rural and urban population nine counties¹⁴ suffered a loss of white individuals; eleven counties¹⁵ suffered a loss of negroes. On the other hand, every county in the group of White Counties increased in rural population. The aver-

⁸ See footnote 4.

⁹ See footnote 5.

¹⁰ See footnote 6.

¹¹ See footnote 7.

¹² See map.

¹³ Wilcox, Dallas, Russell, Greene, Lowndes, Perry, Sumter, Barbour, Hale, Bullock.

¹⁴ Wilcox 771, Russell 197, Greene 295, Lowndes 993, Perry 94, Sumter 295, Barbour 595, Macon 245, and Bullock 1,013.

¹⁵ Wilcox 1,050, Dallas 1,861, Russell 954, Greene 1,169, Lowndes 2,764, Perry 468, Pickens 970, Sumter 3,716, Barbour 1,915, Hale 3,360, and Bullock 735.

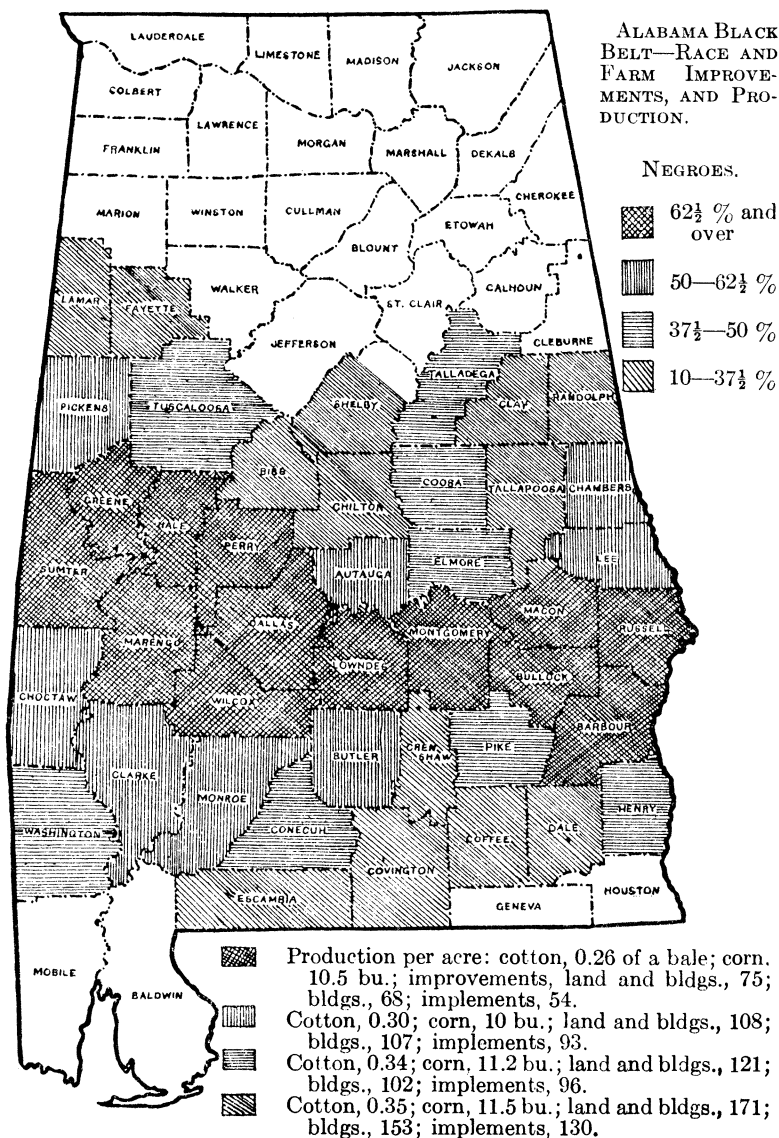
age increase for the group was 21.3 per cent in rural population. The entire white population, rural and urban, increased 19 per cent and the negro population 20.8 per cent.

Such is the agricultural situation in the Black Belt as revealed by the records; a low rate of production, low rate of farm improvements and an actual decline in rural population. But the presentation of the situation is not complete unless we include those phases of rural life which touch and interact upon the agricultural problem, those phases of rural life, educational, social, and economic, that are determining factors in agricultural efficiency. Upon these phases of rural life up-to-date statistics for the two groups of counties are not available, and therefore comparisons impossible, but a survey¹⁶ of two typical White Counties and one Black Belt county as to improved highways found the Black Belt county to rank third in the scale with only twenty-five miles of improved highway as compared with eighty and forty miles for the two White Counties. The average highways of the Black Belt counties are the neglected, crude and inadequate roads of ante-bellum days.¹⁷ An educational survey found conditions more satisfactory in Covington than in Macon County. The question sent out by the state agent for rural schools, "If you were a leader in rural districts and desired to make country life more attractive to young people, along what three lines would you suggest improvement?" brought the following replies: better roads, 137, better schools, 187, more amusements, 180, better churches and more frequent services, 123, better agricultural methods, 59, better houses with labor-saving devices, 101, etc. These replies are more descriptive than words of mine. They present the views of the boys and girls who live in the rural districts and who have already come to know the inadequacies of rural life, inadequacies that have inter-acted upon each other to prevent efficiency in the Black Belt.

This general problem is not without its history. It is the resultant of determinant forces in an earlier period. The distinguishing characteristics of the ante-bellum Black Belt was its agricultural supremacy in Alabama. Its industrial system was made up of the

¹⁶ *Educational Survey of Three Counties in Alabama*. Published by State Department of Education, July 1, 1914, Montgomery, Ala.

¹⁷ Some Black Belt counties have made modern improved highways, notably Montgomery and Dallas counties.



big plantations as the industrial units, and the dominant feature of these units was organization and management, which made this the region of supremacy in Alabama. But the upheaval of the sixties shattered this industrial organization and destroyed this supremacy. In the confusion and disorders of society that followed the Civil War, the Black Belt lost many of the men who had given dignity and strength to its former civilization. Many planters in the unsettled conditions of labor did not care to attempt farming and moved out of the state; others unable to realize on their holdings gave up farming and went to the towns and cities; still others, seeking better educational and social advantages, went to the places where these were to be found. The result was that the lands of the Black Belt were left largely in the hands of the listless, ignorant and unskilled negro. William F. Sanford writing in 1870 described this condition:

We are today poorer than we were on the day of the surrender of the Southern armies. Our carpet baggers and negro scalawags have imposed intolerable taxation upon a people already crushed to earth. A deep and sullen gloom is settling upon the Southern heart. Twelve cents for cotton and one hundred and fifty dollars and rations for a negro idler,—for laborer he will not be,—winds up the plantation business. All this great staple producing area is essentially upon the sheriff's block.¹⁸

In the adjustment of labor to the new conditions of freedom the negro was employed largely under two forms of tenantry: the renting system and the share system.¹⁹ Since the beginning of the system the renting negro has been without supervision and control. By the lien law he was able to obtain supplies from merchants of nearby towns, and being obligated for only so much rent, he farmed according to his own pleasure and judgment, with the result that the farm on which he worked consistently deteriorated. The ditches grew up with grass, the soil washed away, fences and houses decayed, roads went unkept, and there arose in the land the saying, "The negro renter's foot is poison to the soil." On the other hand the share system has involved a degree of control by white men, close in some instances, indifferent in others. The white planters who remained on the plantation after the war, employed largely the share system, sometimes a combination of share and renting. Un-

¹⁸ Letter of William F. Sanford. *Transactions of Alabama, History Society Vol. IV.*

¹⁹ The wage system was at first tried but that has been steadily on the decline.

der this system close supervision was necessary, else failure and ruin were certain. Consequently these men, even though their abilities were great, had their time and energies consumed in this atrophying routine of drudgery. To the woes of supervising listless negro labor were added the distresses of the iniquitous credit system. The life of the post-bellum Black Belt planter therefore was a struggle for dire economic existence. It is little wonder that he lost his independence and his vision. Little wonder that the arts of rural life went undeveloped and that a condition of inefficiency settled upon the Black Belt which has not been removed today.

The history of the White Counties is different. When in the ante-bellum period the competition between industrial units took place—a competition that inevitably took place between the large planters and the small farmer—the small farmer was pushed to the uplands and the region thought by the planters infertile and unsuited for cultivation of the staples. This process in Alabama resulted in majorities of white population in the uplands and Piedmont region, and an industrial system made up of the small democratic farm. The effect of emancipation on these regions was to free their industrial system from competition with the wholesale system of the Black Belt. From the devastation and demolition of the war the White Counties suffered greater losses than the Black Belt, and they had less capital and equipment to begin with after the war,²⁰ but from the nature of their industrial organization readjustment was easier, quicker and more complete. Since 1870 these regions have marched steadily ahead of the Black Belt in production and in agricultural importance in the state. Their lands are less fertile than the lands of the Black Belt, but by the use of commercial fertilizers, rotation of crops and modern methods of farming, they are giving illustration of the possibilities of greater agricultural efficiency through scientific management.

It is clear, I think, that conditions in the Black Belt are out of harmony with other parts of the state, and out of harmony with the times.²¹ If we translate these conditions in terms of dollars it means that the state is losing millions of dollars annually. Suppose the average production per acre of the Black Belt were raised to the

²⁰ *Reconstruction in Alabama*. Fleming, page 713.

²¹ There are certain nuclei of modern methods, for instance at Uniontown, Ala.

average production of the White Counties, upon a conservative estimate it would add fifteen million dollars to the state's wealth. Raise the average production of the Black Belt to half a bale of cotton per acre and thirty million dollars or more will be added to the State's wealth. To put it more emphatically, the state is losing each year approximately thirty million dollars by the continuation of the conditions in the Black Belt.

It is evident that the crux of the problem in the Black Belt is the color and form of tenantry, for greater agricultural efficiency through scientific management is impossible so long as the crude, ignorant negro, unsupervised and undirected, tills the soil. But it merits little and accomplishes less to discover an ill condition and stop with censure. The state faces a condition, not a theory. These facts serve to reveal the stupendous task of the state in the development of efficient agriculture in the Black Belt.

The problem resolves itself, in the first place, into one of improving rural conditions of living so that rural life will become attractive. Improve rural conditions by the establishment of improved highways, coöperative agencies, and better educational facilities, that those who have left the farm may hear the call back to the soil, and that the young men and the young women already on the farm may find the gratification of life's ambitions there! Such an effort as this will raise the price of land to the point where it will remain no longer idle or tilled altogether by unsupervised and unscientific tenantry. But their values will be such that they will be manned by competent white farmers and independent negro tenantry will decrease.²²

In the second place, a greater vision must be given to the farmers. Where there is no vision the farmers err. A farmer in the Black Belt who has been farming for thirty years, and considered one of the best in his community, remarked to me, "I am just beginning to know how to farm; I am just beginning to catch the vision; I have been without it all these years." This man is catching the spirit of scientific agriculture. Give this vision to the farmers and the movement will proceed from within outward. The possibilities of greater agricultural efficiency in the Black Belt can

²² With the rise in the price of lands, renting decreases and the shares system increases. This is true in the white counties of Alabama, also in the white counties of Georgia.

be unfolded in such a manner that the farmers may catch the vision.

In the third place, the negro in the Black Belt must be taught agriculture. We do not believe that the great mass of these people are capable or willing to follow the rules of scientific agriculture, but that some will and can, has already been demonstrated in Alabama.²³ Agricultural instruction for the negro in the Black Belt appears to be a well nigh hopeless task because of the overwhelming ratio of blacks to whites. Here, by fact of the great numerical majority, the negro loses the influence of the white man's example. Removed from proximity to his landlord, he cultivates according to his own methods, which by the very nature of the case are crude, unscientific, and unprofitable. Tenant for the year, he cares only for the year's crop, and that none too seriously, so long as supplies are furnished him. The same crops are planted on the same lands year after year, unsustained by fertilizers and unstirred save by the merest attempt at ploughing. So thriftless are his manners of living, so improvident his methods of agriculture, that they give illustration in our midst of that tribe of South American Indians, who, while being taught agriculture by missionaries, killed their plough oxen when they had felt hunger after the first day's labor. However hopeless the task may appear, the great economic waste of the negro's methods of agriculture urge the undertaking.

The very hindrances the negro presents to the white farmers by his crude methods are reasons in themselves for some kind of agricultural instructions for the negro. That the negroes' method of farming is a direct economic waste is a palpable truth; that the crude and wasteful methods of the negro farmer tend to make the methods of the white farmer less excellent and less scientific is equally true if not so self-evident. The white farmer who deals with ten or twelve negro tenants finds his own standard lowered through the conditions of his contact with their less developed habits of efficiency. He may be ever so exacting and determined in the standard of his methods when he undertakes the enterprise, but he will awake to find himself compromising his standards with those of the crude farmer under him. This truth operates over the entire Black Belt to reduce its agricultural efficiency. The tenant supervised, and the tenant unsupervised, affect the white

²³ The negro schools as community centers in Macon County—*Educational Survey of Three Counties of Alabama*.

farmers of the region with the dragging pull of their low and crude methods. There is something organic even in the nature of the unity of the society of farmers. As within our physical being the improper functioning of one organ hinders the body as a whole, so within the general order of society, the low or unprogressive group is a deterring force. So it is that the crude methods of the negro farmer in the Black Belt pull downward the standards of the white farmer. This is nothing more than a fact of life; it is nothing less than the tragedy of habitual self-adjustment to lower conditions of life and to feebler notions of excellence.

Not only is it true that a group which is declining in efficiency has a tendency to pull the stronger in the descending processes of its ruin, or if it be at stagnation point to impart something of its dead spirit to the living body of the other, but a group which is low has a tendency, if it be growing in efficiency, to exert an upward pressure on the stronger. This is to say that one of the ways to enable the white farmers of the Black Belt to become better and more scientific farmers is to teach the negro better methods of agriculture. Such a process would aid the white farmers by the direct contribution of an advancing efficiency both as to the execution of details and to the larger policy of production. How often does the complaint go up from the farmer of the Black Belt that scientific agriculture is impossible so long as the negro is the laborer! Modern machinery cannot be used because he knows not how to operate it. Valuable accessories to the plantation he knows not the value of. Harness he leaves in the field to mould in the coming rain, cultivators where the last furrow was ploughed, binders or reapers where the last grain was thrashed. Lacking in that sense of value, of thrift, and of economy, he forces the white farmer to that inadequate and inefficient policy that has bound the South since emancipation. But the employer of an improving and saving negro labor may modernize his methods. As his labor becomes more intelligent in agriculture it becomes less wasteful, and thereby relieved somewhat of the minute and nerveracking supervision of ignorant and careless labor, he may give more attention to a sounder economy and a broader outlook for the plantation. So, too, improved knowledge of agriculture among tenants supervised and tenants unsupervised will not only reduce the pull downward of the white farmers' standards, but will exert an upward pressure. If the negro farmer

be growing in efficiency the white farmer will likewise grow in order to maintain his relatively higher standard. This, too, is nothing more than a fact of life; it is nothing less than the hopeful policy by which the Black Belt will be raised from its present backward and inefficient economic position.